



Consumer Education Website Continuous Improvement Series

Child Care Search Suite



Best Practice Brief: Online Child Care Search Tools

The Consumer Education Website Continuous Improvement Series aims to help Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF) Lead Agencies develop effective, family-friendly consumer education websites. This series is designed to support the efforts of jurisdictions as they enhance their consumer education websites to help families better understand the full range of child care options and resources available to them.

The Child Care Search Suite includes complementary resources that CCDF Lead Agencies can use to specifically inform child care search tool enhancements that provide families with easy access to useful, accurate, and understandable information that helps them search for, identify, and choose child care that meets their needs.

How Can This Brief Help You?

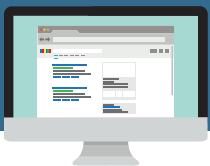
CCDF regulations require that Lead Agencies provide “a searchable list of all licensed child care providers, and, at the discretion of the Lead Agency, all eligible child care providers (other than an individual who is related to all children for whom child care services are provided), differentiating between licensed and license-exempt providers, and searchable by zip code.”¹ To review CCDF requirements for the child care search component of your consumer education website, please follow the links in the text box to the right, Resources: CCDF Consumer Education Website Requirements, or see the Child Care Search Tool Assessment Checklist.

Resources: CCDF Consumer Education Website Requirements

- [CCDF Consumer Education Website Requirements Infographic](#)
- [State and Territory Child Care Consumer Education Website: Self-Assessment Checklist](#)

There are many ways to design a user-friendly child care search tool. This Best Practice Brief: Online Child Care Search Tools aims to help CCDF Lead Agencies and partners consider program-level information and search tool features that may enhance the child care search process for families to help them assess and choose child care that meets their specific needs.

¹Child Care and Development Fund, 45 C.F.R. § 98.33(a)(2) (2016).



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How Can You Improve Your Child Care Search?

The child care search tool is a core component of your child care consumer education website that families regularly visit and use. An effective, easy-to-use child care search tool helps families not only find the child care they need, but it will also help them make informed child care choices. If families find your child care search tool useful and informative, it can help build awareness for your website and strengthen your audience's confidence in its content. This will help families recognize it as a trusted source of child care information.

To help you meet these goals, this brief presents some best practices for the following aspects of a child care search tool: General Features, Search Criteria, Search Results, and Detailed Provider Profiles. Even integrating just a few of these elements can make your search tool more useful to families.

General Features

Use Information Icons

To help families understand the key terms referenced in the search, use information icons (such as a question mark or information icon) as a way to provide additional information. Families can click on or hover over these icons to display a pop-up window that displays a brief description. In this pop-up window, follow these guidelines:

- Provide a clear, concise definition for terms with which families may not be familiar
- Use plain language
- Incorporate direct links to pages that provide more detailed information about the term so that families can learn more

It may be helpful to define terms that will help families understand content. These include types of care, licensed and license-exempt programs, what quality ratings represent, subsidy programs, and so on.

Avoid Login Requirements

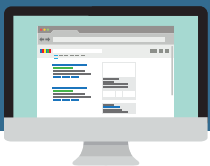
Users want access to information as quickly as possible. They also want to avoid providing personal information when it is unnecessary. Requiring a user to create a username and password to simply search for child care creates an unnecessary barrier to accessing information. You may want to consider an option that lets users create an account to save searches, but this should not be required to simply access information.

For Small Jurisdictions (fewer than 200 providers)

If you are a jurisdiction with a relatively small child care provider population, your website may not need a robust child care search tool.

Nonetheless, you may want to consider how some of these best practice elements could be applied to your searchable or sortable child care list format.

For instance, you may be able to include a link to each provider's inspection report results directly in the list. You may also be able to include some additional information about child care services offered by the provider in the list format, such as ages served and hours of operation.



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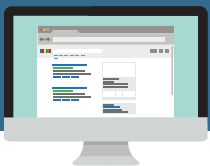
Search Criteria

To help families find child care that meets their specific needs, you should consider including additional provider-level information that will help refine their child care search. Below is a list of program-level information that may help families narrow down their search results so that they may more easily identify programs that meet their specific care needs.

- Location
 - ZIP code
 - Address with search radius
 - “On my route” feature
- Program types (consider how license-exempt programs can be included)
 - Center-based
 - Family child care
 - Summer camps, and so on
- Age groups served
- Days and hours of operation
- Yearly schedule
 - Full year
 - School year
 - Summer only
- Additional services
 - Drop-in care
 - Sick care
 - Overnight care
 - School vacation care
 - Transportation provided
- Quality rating and improvement system (QRIS) rating (or other state-defined quality measure)
- Accreditation status
- Financial assistance
 - State subsidy program
 - Scholarships
 - Sibling discounts
 - Other programs available
- Environmental features (for example, no pets, fenced in area, no pool)
- Languages spoken by provider and staff
- Training and experience to support children with special needs

SCBC’s Child Care Search Suite Resources

- [Best Practice Brief: Online Child Care Search Tools](#)
- [Child Care Search Tool Assessment Checklist](#)
- [Tip Sheet: How to Implement Child Care Search Tool Enhancements](#)
- [Best Practice Brief: Data Collection Considerations to Support an Enhanced Child Care Search](#)
- [Tip Sheet: Data Governance Makes It Possible](#)



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Search Results

Once a family has entered their search criteria and selected “search,” they should then be able to view their child care search results. These results should be easy to scan and provide the information families need to make informed child care choices. This section describes some best practices for your child care search display.

Search Results Display

Consider how you format the search results page. The search results page should be easy to scan and understand. It should also highlight key program information that will help families scan and assess their child care search results. Below are some best practices to consider:

- Display results in both map and list formats
 - The map should include a pin for each provider who met the search criteria.
 - It is helpful to let families see some basic provider information when they hover over or select a pin on the map (this may include the provider name, address, and QRIS rating).
 - Allow families to sort the list by key criteria (such as QRIS rating or proximity to location provided).
- Display key summary information on the map and list
 - Provider name
 - Address
 - Phone
 - Ages served
 - Quality rating
 - Link to a detailed provider profile
 - An indication of provider availability (see Best Practice Brief: Data Collection Considerations to Support an Enhanced Child Care Search for considerations relating to collecting and displaying provider availability information)

Tip: Use Dynamic Search Filters

Make child care search filters dynamic so that families can choose more than one item from a search category. This feature offers families the most flexibility in their search.

For example, let’s say a family needs care for their infant and preschooler. A dynamic search filter will allow them to select both infant and preschool, so they may conduct one search for both children.

Where Will the Data for New Program Attributes Come From?

The enhancements presented here require provider-level data to support them. You will need to determine how to collect this new information—either through internal data systems or by other means.

For example, a provider self-service portal allows providers to update select fields in their provider profile such as current availability, schedules, rates, and other general information. For more detailed information, see Best Practice Brief: Data Collection Considerations to Support an Enhanced Child Care Search.

Detailed Provider Profiles

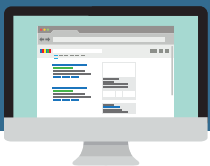
It is also helpful to include detailed provider profiles that users can access directly from the search results display. The provider profile can display more detailed program-level information than a list or map summary.

Integrate Consumer Education Website Requirements

According to CCDF requirements related to consumer education websites,² Lead Agencies must display the following provider-level data on their consumer education website:

- Quality rating, if applicable

² Child Care and Development Fund, 45 C.F.R. § 98.33(a)(4) (2016).



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- Monitoring and inspection reports, which must include the following:
 - Prominent display of any serious health and safety violations by the provider, including any fatalities and serious injuries
 - Date of last monitoring inspection
 - Corrective action
 - At least 3 years of monitoring and inspection results, including inspections of substantiated complaints

The child care search is an optimal location to include this information so that families can review it while they search for care and use it to assess their care options.

Integrate Helpful Provider-Level Information

In addition to the care information presented in the search criteria section above, consider including some of the following information in the provider profile:

- Address and phone number
- Link to the provider's website
- Licensed status (licensed, license-exempt)
- License or registration number
- Director name and contact information
- Rates
- Program overview or narrative
- Staff to child ratios
- Meal options (types of meals and snacks available to children)
- Sample class schedule
- Curriculum details
- Special activities (field trips, parents' night out, and so on)
- Open slots or availability

Tip: In the provider profile, use date stamps, either for time sensitive information such as rates and availability or for the overall provider profile (for example, last updated 04/28/2021).

Quick Tip: Learn from Other Jurisdictions

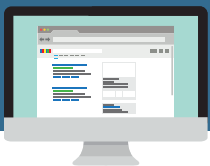
[ChildCare.gov](https://www.childcare.gov) is a national consumer education website that is supported by the Office of Child Care and is designed to provide families across the country with the child care information they need. Through its [See Your State's Resources tool](#), ChildCare.gov can connect you to a wide array of state and territory resources, including their main consumer education website as well as their child care search, information about monitoring and inspection reports, and much more.

Use ChildCare.gov to peruse how other jurisdictions have approached key components of their consumer education website, including design features and content elements. You may be able to identify elements that may work well in your jurisdiction and incorporate that information into planning continuous improvement of your consumer education website.

Additional Considerations

In addition to the best practices listed above, you should also consider other factors that may strengthen the utility and visibility of your child care search.

- **How does the design of your child care search feature and search results page help families search for child care?**
When families search for child care, make it easy for them to read and print out the search results. Include whitespace, check for accessibility, and make sure that your website is mobile-friendly so that parents can access the information from their cell phones or tablets. Also, make sure that families can find the search tool on your consumer education website. You should include a link, button, or icon in the search tool on each page of your website.



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- **How can your search tool be more helpful during emergencies?**

You want your audience to be able to count on your consumer education website and search tool to provide critical child care information, no matter the circumstances. This helps bolster credibility for your search tool and overall consumer education website as the trusted source of child care information in your jurisdiction.

During an emergency, your child care search tool should be the search of record in your jurisdiction. Consider how your child care search tool can be leveraged during emergencies to share urgent child care information with families and providers. Consider the following examples:

- Can you easily exclude providers who close because of an emergency from the active search? It is best to differentiate an “emergency closure” from providers who voluntarily choose to close their business during non-emergencies and those who are mandated to close because of serious health and safety violations. Do you have a way to collect this information quickly and easily?
- Could you add a field that will allow you to identify programs that are approved to provide emergency care? Can you easily limit your active search to only those approved providers during an emergency?

Including some of these features in your child care search tool will help you strengthen your communication system with families and providers, minimize confusion, and eliminate the need for duplicated efforts to help identify the status of child care providers during emergencies and disasters.

- **Can families find your search tool easily when they conduct an online search?**

Be sure that your consumer education website and child care search page leverage search engine optimization (SEO). SEO increases the likelihood that search engines will (1) match your website to user’s online search criteria and (2) rank your website content higher than others on search engine result pages. In other words, be sure to increase SEO to ensure your audience can easily find your website online. For more detailed information on SEO best practices, see the Child Care State Capacity Building Center’s Module 2: Promoting Your Consumer Education Website and [Guide for Increasing Search Engine Optimization](#).

Do You Have Questions?

If you have questions about whether your planned website enhancements meet CCDF requirements, please consult with your [Office of Child Care regional office](#) for guidance.

If you would like technical assistance on developing and enhancing your consumer education website, including your child care search, contact the Child Care State Capacity Building Center (CapacityBuildingCenter@ecetta.info).

The State Capacity Building Center (SCBC) works with state and territory leaders and their partners to create innovative early childhood systems and programs that improve results for children and families. The SCBC is funded by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Office of Child Care.

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